

The Indian Wars and US Military Thought, 1865-1890

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We're marching off for Sitting Bull
And this is the way we go—
Forty miles a day, on beans and hay,
With the Regular Army, O!¹

This verse from an old marching tune recalls perhaps the most storied period in the history of the US Army, the Indian wars of 1865 to 1890. The era is certainly familiar to most Americans thanks to countless novels, television programs, and movies telling of the Army's battles with various tribes of the West. The popular images of campaigns against the Sioux, Cheyennes, and Apaches are of a small professional Army meeting an unconventional enemy on his own terms and defeating him. The romantic view created by movies and novels, however, is only partly true. Engagements with hostile Indians were rare, and rarer still was one that was an unqualified victory for the Army.

Even rarer yet were instances of Army units fighting Indians with unconventional techniques. The casual student of this chapter of history assumes, of course, that the Army developed a doctrine of war specifically tailored to the mobile hit-and-run tactics employed by the Indians. On the contrary, as noted by historian Robert Utley, "The Army as an institution never evolved a doctrine of Indian warfare." No course of instruction distinguishing between conventional and unconventional warfare was ever instituted at West Point, nor did the staff bureaus ever issue guidance to deal with the guerrilla tactics of the Indians. Utley concluded, "Lacking a formal doctrine of unconventional war, the Army waged conventional war."²

This unconcern with doctrine for fighting Indians is remarkable. Throughout most of the Army's history to that point, its principal occupation

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was dealing with Indians. In fact, this mission was often the only justification Congress and the American people saw for the continued existence of the Army.

What explains the Army's neglect of unconventional warfare doctrine? Several factors contributed. The Army of 1865-1890 was an organization that became increasingly isolated from the society it served during the post-Civil War period. Army leaders recognized that the Indian threat would sooner or later end and the Army's traditional internal security mission would end with it. Therefore, the Army sought to define a new role for itself in the closing decades of the 19th century.

Influencing this search for a continuing relevance in society was the Army's own history, contemporary political and social trends, and the belief that the United States would become a prominent force in the international community. In combination, these factors led the Army to reject its previous self-image as a largely constabulary force and to see its future as a professional force oriented on external threats. These foreign threats, while not clearly defined, would certainly be conventional military forces on the pattern of leading European armies. Thus unconventional war and doctrine, such as that typified by the Indian campaigns, was viewed as tangential and not worth pursuing.

Isolation of the Army

The most important factor leading to the rejection of unconventional doctrine as a subject of importance was the Army's increasing isolation from American society. Though John M. Gates and a few other revisionists reject the concept of isolation,³ the mainstream scholarly view, typified by that of Samuel P. Huntington, holds not only that the frontier Army was isolated from society but that indeed such isolation was a "prerequisite to professionalism."⁴ Certainly the officers stationed on the frontier believed they were isolated, and understanding this is crucial to understanding their resulting neglect of unconventional warfare. At times the presumed alienation of the civilian sector toward the Army was seen as a threat to its continued existence. Civilian ambivalence and, at times, hostility were the catalysts that drove the Army to a redefinition of its role.

The Army's isolation was itself the product of various causes. The first and perhaps most pervasive cause was the traditional American belief

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that a large standing military was a threat to a democratic society. Samuel Adams summarized this American suspicion of standing armies in general in his observation that a “standing army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the liberties of the people.” He further noted:

Soldiers are apt to consider themselves as a body distinct from the rest of the citizens. They have their arms always in their hands. Their rules and their discipline is severe. They soon become attached to their officers and disposed to yield implicit obedience to their commands. Such a power should be watched with a jealous eye.⁵

The nation’s response to this belief in the danger of a standing army had always been to have the smallest Regular Army possible in peacetime. This tiny regular force would be augmented in an emergency with state militias and volunteer troops. Paradoxically, the success of the Union Army in the Civil War reinforced both the fear of a large peacetime Army and the belief in the utility of the militia system. Between 1865 and 1890 Congress often acted on this principle of American democracy and sought to limit the size of the Regular Army. In doing so, Congress came to be viewed by the Army as an enemy.

The first post-Civil War act establishing the peacetime strength of the Army was signed by President Andrew Johnson in July 1866. This act set the strength of the Army at 54,302 officers and men.⁶ However, Congress shortly began to cut the strength of the regular force: in 1869 the number of infantry regiments was reduced from 45 to 25, effectively reducing the Army to a total strength of 37,313. The next year Congress imposed further reductions, to a total of 30,000 enlisted, and in 1874 it limited the enlisted force to no more than 25,000.⁷

These reductions did not lower the number of companies in the force structure, so strength within the individual companies was reduced dramatically. For example, in 1881 the average strength of infantry companies was only 41, of artillery batteries 40, and of cavalry troops 58.⁸ Such curtailment was extremely detrimental to unit efficiency, and its ill effects were compounded by the usual absences due to desertion, illness, and detached duty.

The Army leadership viewed this long-term trend with alarm. They saw that the Army was overcommitted and in danger of being unable to perform its missions. Further, they feared that continued reductions could eventually threaten the organization’s very existence. Reviewing the cumulative effects of these reductions in his annual report of 1880, the Army’s commander, General William T. Sherman, noted that “the Army is too small in enlisted men to fulfill the heavy duties now imposed on it, and is over-worked.”⁹ Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan, commander of the Division of the Missouri, felt compelled to add to his superior’s remarks in his own annual report for 1880. He stressed the danger of inadequate strength:

To thoroughly and effectively perform the duties devolving upon us compels us many times to overwork our troops, and not unfrequently obliges us to take the field with small detachments, which have heretofore occasionally been overmatched and greatly outnumbered by our foes. This is not as it should be; but so long as our companies are limited to their [low] average strength, . . . it cannot be avoided.¹⁰

To remedy this situation, the Army leadership made numerous appeals to Congress for increases in the size of the force. Typical of these appeals was that of Sherman in 1880 when he asked for a net increase of 5000 men.¹¹ Congress's usual response was to ignore the request. In fact, by 1885 the overall strength of the Army was allowed to decrease to a total of 26,859.¹²

Appropriations were another area of congressional neglect and hostility to the Army. In 1877 and 1879 Congress failed to pass an appropriations bill. The effect of these failures was that soldiers didn't get paid. Although rations and clothing issues to enlisted men continued, officers and married soldiers faced severe hardship until Congress passed emergency funding measures.¹³ This action further weakened the convictions of soldiers and officers that the Army was a promising career and that Congress was sympathetic toward the military.

The traditional concern about the threat of a standing army to liberty was not the only source of congressional hostility. In the early years following the Civil War, much of the Army was assigned to duties in the South enforcing Reconstruction. The problems inherent in these duties were essentially unsolvable. The Army became involved in political power struggles, first between the executive and legislative branches and later between the Republican and Democratic parties. Initially, the Army was compelled to follow the more moderate policies of President Andrew Johnson. However, Radical Reconstructionists in Congress soon began to gain the political ascendancy. Grant, first as Commanding General and later as President, moved the Army into the Radical Reconstruction camp.

Most Army officers, however, disagreed with the harsh policies of the radicals. Many expressed the view that the radical approach was self-defeating because it would only provoke Southerners rather than speed their reassimilation into the Union. Sherman best expressed this view in a letter to his brother in 1865: "No matter what change we may desire in the feelings and thoughts of people . . . we cannot accomplish it by force. Nor can we afford to maintain . . . an army large enough to hold [the Southerners] in subjugation."¹⁴

Another view widely held within the Army was that the demands of Radical Reconstructionism were counter to the constitutional provisions mandating civil control of the military. In a public statement rebuking a military subordinate who had taken the position that civil government in the South was

subservient to the military, the Commander of the Fourth Military District of Arkansas said: "Your assertion that the military forces are not the servants of the people of Arkansas, but rather their masters, is unjust both to the people and the military. . . . The military forces are the servants of the laws and the laws are for the benefit of the people."¹⁵

Expressing a similar viewpoint was Major General Winfield Scott Hancock. In a letter to his wife he explained his reluctance to assume Reconstruction duties in New Orleans: "I have not been educated to overthrow the civil authorities in time of peace."¹⁶ Lenient views such as these neither pleased Radical Reconstructionists nor escaped their notice. The result of this displeasure was that congressional radicals disbanded regiments no longer needed for Reconstruction rather than posting them to the frontier. By these acts, the radical Republicans demonstrated that the Army could expect no sympathy from that quarter.¹⁷

Compounding the Army's predicament, Southerners themselves were generally hostile. In some cases, local Federal commanders did support harsh Reconstruction. For example, Sheridan saw fit to fire the mayor of New Orleans, the governors of Louisiana and Texas, and numerous other Southern officials during his tenure in the South.¹⁸ Southerners objected particularly to the Army enforcing the new laws regarding black suffrage and civil rights. In any case, Southerners clearly saw that without the Army, Reconstruction would be finished. Their natural desire for self-determination guaranteed resentment of uniformed authority.

In 1875, Democrats won majority control of the House of Representatives. This event began the return of Southerners to national power. Allying with Northern Democrats, they began to attack the Army, hoping to eliminate it as a means of enforcing Reconstruction. The Southern Democrats supported all attempts to decrease the Army's size and appropriations. These attacks on the Army continued until the end of Reconstruction in the late 1870s.¹⁹

Another source of problems for the Army in its relations with Congress was its use to suppress strikes and other civil disturbances. The Army was used often outside the South to quell riots and break strikes. For example, in 1885 and 1886 troops were used to suppress anti-Chinese riots in Wyoming and Washington. The Army broke strikes in Michigan in 1872, intervened in the Great Railway Strike of 1877, and was employed in a similar role in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in 1892 and 1894. Labor interests were enraged by these actions and sought political support from Democrats to halt them. Labor leaders became the willing allies of Southerners and actively supported the efforts of the House majority to reduce the size of the Army drastically.²⁰

Yet another reason for the Army's isolation was the deep domestic conflict over Indian policy. One faction was resoundingly pro-Indian, believing that the Army was directly responsible for most disturbances involving the

Indian tribes. Groups within this faction, known generally as Reformers, were made up largely of liberal Easterners who advocated the gradual, peaceful assimilation of Indians into American society. These groups, the most powerful of which was the Indian Rights Association led by Herbert Welsh, argued that land-hungry Western whites were using the Army to annihilate the Indian. While most of the Reformers' attacks were directed at Western civilians and their supporters in Congress, the Army was the target of many attacks in the media and in Congress.²¹ On the other hand, Western civilians often castigated the Army for failing to protect them from Indian raids. Many believed the Army to be incompetent and too sympathetic to the Indian.

For its part, the Army generally held both sides in contempt. Army leaders criticized the Eastern Reformers, holding that these groups were ignorant of the true conditions in the West. General Nelson A. Miles perhaps best summarized the Army view of these humanitarian groups. In a letter to his wife he noted it "required a peculiar kind of genius to conduct an Indian campaign from West Point—or Boston, although they know a great deal about Indians in that model city—at least they think they do, which is very important."²²

Army contempt for Western extremists was also harsh. Many officers believed greed on the part of whites was responsible for hostilities. This view is typified by the writings of Major Alfred Hough, who charged that frontiersmen were a "wholly unscrupulous" lot. "It is an outrage," he continued, "that we of the Army who have all the hardships to encounter should be made such catspaws or mere tools of ambitious men who care only for their own interests and cater to the public for sympathy."²³

So, the Army sought to walk the middle ground between these two counterposed groups. As is the usual fate of those who seek compromise, it found itself assailed by both sides. Being caught between these two factions strengthened professional soldiers' feelings of alienation and, in turn, reinforced their fears for the future of their organization.

Another factor contributing to the Army's isolation was the low esteem society had for soldiers and the Army in general. A not uncommon view of soldiers was presented by a reporter in Hays City, Kansas, in 1883 who referred to soldiers from the local post as "white trash" and "coons."²⁴ Officers were held in only slightly better regard, as evidenced by Congressman Fernando Wood's remark that they were "idle vagabonds who are well paid and do nothing."²⁵

The manifestations of these adverse attitudes ranged from ridicule to open hostility and were plainly evident to soldiers. For example, one regular soldier asked his Congressman for help in getting a pension and was flatly refused. Writing his former commander, he explained that the politician had refused to help because he "had worn the uniform of a 'regular.'"²⁶ A more ominous result of civilian antipathy was an incident in Walla Walla, Washington,

where a gambler shot and wounded a soldier. Enraged, and fearing that the civilian criminal would escape justice, a group of soldiers seized the man from the sheriff and lynched him on the jail grounds.²⁷ Obviously, such episodes did little to elevate soldiers in the eyes of civilians.

The final source of isolation which must be understood was the physical separation of the Army from the population. During most of the post-Civil War era, the Army was posted to numerous small forts on the frontier. Physical isolation contributed to a growing civilian ignorance of the Army and its problems. The reaction of an Eastern woman in 1885 was not atypical. Meeting a colonel, she exclaimed, "What, a colonel of the Army? Why I supposed the Army was all disbanded at the close of the [Civil] war."²⁸

Search for a New Role

The psychological and physical separation of the Army was a matter of great concern to the Army's leaders. Major General John Pope addressed the danger of alienation on soldiers' attitudes:

So long as the soldier remains one of the people; so long as he shares their interests, takes part in their progress, and feels a common sympathy with them in their hopes and aspirations, so long will the Army be held in honorable esteem and regard. . . . When he ceases to do this; when officers and soldiers cease to be citizens in the highest and truest sense, the Army will deserve to lose, as it will surely lose, its place in the affections of the people, and properly and naturally become an object of suspicion and dislike.²⁹

Pope went on to note, "The well-being of the people equally with the well-being of the Army requires a common sympathy and common interest between them."³⁰ Thus, Pope saw isolation as a threat to the bonds between the Army and the society it served. If these bonds were broken, the Army's existence would be threatened.

For most of the period 1865-1890, therefore, the attention of the Army's more enlightened leaders was focused on articulating a role which would secure its link to society. Unconventional war against Indians did not offer this sort of mission and therefore was downplayed. Indian war did not seem to be a promising role for two reasons completely apart from the Army's aversion to being drawn into domestic political conflict.

First, Indians posed only a minor regional threat. By 1865, the Indian threat was confined to the Great Plains, the Southwest, and the interior portions of the Pacific Northwest. The major population areas in the East and on the West Coast were not in danger, and, as noted earlier, civilians from these areas tended to view the Indian as the threatened party. Therefore, the majority of Americans could not be expected to support the Army in its battles with hostile tribes.

Second, Army leaders believed that even this modest Indian threat would soon end. As early as 1866, General Grant foresaw the end of the Indian wars, noting, "With the expiration of the [Civil War], Indian hostilities have diminished."³¹ In 1875, Sherman echoed this view in his annual report: "Generally speaking the damage to life and property by Indians is believed to be less during the past year than in any former year, and the prospect is that as the country settles up it will be less and less each year."³²

Even had a greater Indian threat remained, Army officers would have continued to devote little effort to developing an unconventional war doctrine because conventional tactics often worked well. As Robert Utley points out, "The conventional tactics of the Scott, Casey, and Upton manuals sometimes worked . . . [and] when they worked, they worked with a vengeance."³³

Essentially, the problem with conventional tactics was that normally the Army was not sufficiently mobile to bring the Indians to battle. Time and again, cavalry and infantry would trail hostile bands for weeks but fail to get them to stand and fight. An excellent example of this sort of futile campaign was that led by Major General Hancock against the Southern Plains tribes in April 1867. Hancock was in command of a force of approximately 4000 soldiers consisting of 11 troops of the 7th Cavalry, seven companies of the 37th Infantry, and a battery of the 4th Artillery. Initially he attempted to negotiate a peace treaty with a large band of Cheyenne and Oglala Sioux. When these attempts failed, Hancock attacked the villages only to discover the lodges were empty. He immediately gave pursuit and followed the hostiles



Brigadier General George Crook is pictured with two Apache scouts. He employed the highly mobile scouts to fix Apache hostiles in actions in Arizona in 1882-83, then relied on dogged pursuit to wear down and defeat the enemy.

through Kansas, southwestern Nebraska, and eastern Colorado. In spite of his best efforts, Hancock never caught the Sioux and Cheyenne war parties. Finally, his command exhausted, he was forced to return to his base in Fort Wallace, Kansas, in early July 1867.³⁴

Analyzing this failure, Sherman saw winter warfare as a means to deprive the enemy of mobility. Putting this idea to the test, Brigadier General George Crook began a winter offensive against the Paiutes in Oregon during the winter of 1867-1868. Keeping constant pressure on the hostiles, he pursued them far into the winter months. Since Indian horses foraged on grass, the winter months were exceptionally hard on them. Also, pursuit forced the Indians to move constantly, which kept them from hunting or gathering other food supplies. Army horses, on the other hand, were grain-fed and could be replaced if necessary. The wagon trains or strings of pack mules which slowed the Army in the summer allowed them to continue operations in the coldest of winters. Thus, in winter the Army had the advantage of superior mobility. Crook's tactics forced the Paiutes to surrender in the late winter of 1868. This campaign clearly demonstrated that the innovative application of conventional tactics under the right circumstances could defeat the Indians.³⁵

Variations on this theme were frequent. Crook altered his own tactics in 1882-1883 in actions against the Apaches in Arizona by using highly mobile Apache scouts to fix the hostiles. However, he still relied on a dogged pursuit to eventually wear down and defeat the enemy.³⁶ Using essentially the same tactics, Brigadier General Miles finally completed the defeat of the Apaches in 1886. He added a new feature: outposts of signal troops to detect and report enemy movement. In his instructions to his soldiers he stressed constant pursuit, stating, "Commanding officers are expected to continue a pursuit until capture, or until they are assured a fresh command is on the trail."³⁷ Praising Miles for his successful campaign, Lieutenant General Sheridan summed up the success of conventional tactics: "[Miles'] troops followed up the hostiles with vigorous energy, broke up their camps by attack four or five times, and gave them no rest until they surrendered."³⁸

Conventional tactics were not always successful, of course. However, they did achieve victory often enough to persuade Army officers that there was little point in devising new doctrine. Utley notes that "unit for unit—however great the numbers, the Indians could not come close to matching the discipline and organization of the Army." Utley concludes that "when Indians made the mistake of standing and fighting on the Army's terms, they usually lost."³⁹

The Rise of Professionalism

The final factor tending to deflect doctrinal thinking from Indian fighting was the rise of military professionalism. In the view of historian

Edward M. Coffman, professionalism was an emerging trend throughout American society in the last three decades of the 19th century. He argues that society changed because of the emergence of a new middle class in which the professions organized and established standards for themselves. Soldiers became a part of this movement.⁴⁰ Further, realizing that the Army's days as an Indian-fighting force were numbered, "Sherman and other leaders had reached the conclusion that the Army's mission in peacetime was to prepare for war."⁴¹

Since officers were coming to see themselves as professionals dedicated to preparing for future wars, the question then became, What would a modern war be like? In answering this question, leaders looked to their own most recent experience and to those of other modern, 19th-century armies. The most relevant American experience was obviously the Civil War. Almost every senior officer during the period 1865-1890 was a veteran of this conflict, and many had held high volunteer rank. The war was obviously the shaping event of these men's lives. In the words of Jerry M. Cooper, it "affected the officer corps more profoundly than had the Mexican War. The nature of the Civil War, with its enormous logistical demands and costly battlefield stalemate, altered the corporate consciousness of a significant element of officers."⁴²

The Civil War, as the seminal event of their careers, influenced Army leaders' thinking about both current operations and the nature of future conflicts. In the area of immediate operations against the Indians, it reinforced the tendencies of commanders to apply conventional tactics. The massive scale of Civil War operations and the emergence of a total-war philosophy were key features in the minds of Sherman, Sheridan, and their subordinates. Lacking the resources for truly massive campaigns against the Indians, they nevertheless practiced total war against the tribes to the degree permitted. As noted earlier, their real and perceived success using conventional, total-war tactics further reinforced their bias toward this doctrine.⁴³

The war's influence on their perceptions of the future also prompted them to emphasize conventional doctrine. The carnage and lengthy stalemate of the Civil War caused them to seek new methods of command and organization to prevent a repetition. Americans believed they had found these new methods in the examples of foreign armies. Especially significant was the model provided by Prussia in its defeat of the French in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian War.

Sheridan and Colonel William B. Hazen were observers of the Franco-Prussian War. Both were enormously impressed with the similarity of that war to the American Civil War and with the German military system.⁴⁴ Upon receiving their observations, Sherman dispatched his protégé, Emory Upton, on a worldwide tour to study foreign armies and methods.

Upton published the results in 1878 in his book *The Armies of Asia and Europe*. In this work, he severely criticized the American military system, arguing strongly for adoption of the German model. Although Congress was unwilling to accept most of Upton's suggestions, Sherman implemented those he could on his own authority. Most important for future doctrine in the American Army was Sherman's attempt to foster professional development. Specifically, Sherman instituted a series of professional schools which together could grow to mirror the Prussian army's educational system.

These efforts began in 1881 with the establishment of the Infantry and Cavalry School of Application at Fort Leavenworth. A logical extension was the requirement for officers to participate in lyceum programs at their posts. These programs were conceived by Major General John Schofield in order to "stimulate professional zeal and ambition."⁴⁵

In addition, Army leaders encouraged participation in professional organizations such as the Military Service Institute. Other professional organizations were formed, including associations of cavalry, artillery, and infantry officers. The most significant feature of these organizations was that they all published journals and urged their members to contribute articles.⁴⁶ Through these works, Army officers' views of themselves as professional soldiers were strengthened.

Officers began to actively develop new ideas and theories about tactics, logistics, leadership, and the purpose of an army. It was natural for them to view conventional war as being on the scale of the Civil War, but as practiced by an army on the European model established in 1871 in the Franco-Prussian War. Such, to them, became the epitome of modern war and professionalism. Their experiences in unconventional war against savages in the West clearly did not fit this mold. Consequently they tended to ignore Indian-fighting as beneath them as professionals. Clearly, unconventional war would not be relevant in the future, and thus generation of doctrine peculiar to it would be of little value.

Conclusions

The Army turned its back on its unconventional war history mainly because it felt itself threatened as an institution. The conclusion of the Civil War unleashed the antimilitary sentiment always close to the surface in American society. The fact that the North had won a brilliant victory with a volunteer army in the greatest war of American history only increased suspicions of the Regular Army. In the civilian community, it clearly seemed the Regular Army was not essential to fighting great wars. Further, with the South's defeat, there did not appear to be any threat of a great war on the horizon.

The only obvious roles for the Army now lay in enforcing Reconstruction, quelling civil disorders and strikes, and campaigning against the

Indians. All of those missions were controversial, subjecting the Army to the rough-and-tumble of American politics, with all the perils associated therewith. Further, both Reconstruction duty and the conduct of Indian wars were missions which promised to end shortly.

The hostility, political pressure, and neglect suffered by the Army caused a sense of psychological isolation to develop within, and its leadership began to search for a new mission. At the same time, professionalism became a force in American civilian society. Eagerly assimilating the professional ethic, the Army came to see its peacetime role as preparing for war. Leaders adopted European styles as the governing model for professional armies and modern wars. Accordingly, the American Army came to emphasize conventional war rather than irregular, unconventional struggles against hostile natives.

But what were the costs of this evolution to conventional war doctrine? By failing to develop and record a coherent unconventional doctrine, a valuable tradition was lost. Many lessons learned by hardship, trial, and error on the frontier were pushed out of mind. Ironically, the Army soon found itself fighting an unconventional war in the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902). Could that conflict have been won at a lesser cost if officers and soldiers of that time had been trained in unconventional doctrine based on the Army's Indian-fighting tradition? Further, if unconventional doctrine had been explored in depth as the Army sought to professionalize itself, could the doctrine have become a part of the traditional field of study in the American Army's school system? And if unconventional war was a legitimate area of study for the Army, could more study have helped avoid the errors made in 20th-century unconventional war? One can only speculate as to the answers, but it seems plausible that there is at least some causal connection between the lack of relevant tradition codified in doctrine and the lack of success on future battlefields.

On the other hand, the move away from unconventional war held benefits for the Army and the nation. True, the Army would be engaged in unconventional wars after the close of the frontier, but these wars would not be as vital to the nation as its conventional conflicts. The Spanish-American War (1898) accelerated America's assumption of an important international role. The two World Wars continued this process and ultimately validated the United States as a preeminent world power. This status would not have been possible had the Army not become a professional organization oriented toward fighting large-scale conventional wars. The words of historian Russell Weigley are of particular point in this regard:

If isolation from the main currents of American life encouraged an unhealthy introspection in such a figure as Emory Upton, it also . . . encouraged the healthy aspects of concentration upon things military. The rapid accomplishments of the early twentieth century in building a new Army suited to world power were built upon foundations laid in the twilight years of the old and isolated Army.⁴⁷

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